

Thesis



Introduction

Your thesis first and foremost marks a conclusion. It marks the end of a long course of study and, for many, it also marks the end of student life. It means you will wave goodbye to established routines, friends and acquaintances, and your school or college. But it also means that you will soon be saying hello to the new and exciting challenges associated with joining the labour market.

There is no simple solution and no universal recipe for how best to plan writing your thesis. How you choose to approach your thesis depends on many different factors. However, it is important that you think about how you ensure that you create the best possible conditions for yourself as you write your thesis.

This leaflet describes some of the most common obstacles that can occur during a thesis writing process before, during and after its submission. The leaflet also offers ideas as to how you can overcome obstacles.

You can read the leaflet from start to finish or you can read individual sections. At the end of each section, you will find good advice as to how to proceed to the next phase in the process.

We hope that this leaflet will inspire you to plan carefully how you tackle the process of writing your thesis and we hope that it explains what to do if you encounter difficulties on the way.

If you need more help than a leaflet can give, you are welcome to contact the Student Counselling Service.

Director Sten Kruse-Blinkenberg
The Student Counselling Service, December 2014

Problems with your thesis?

The issue of writing a thesis is associated with many myths and fantastic stories. These affect us all to some extent. You may have heard tell or even know of someone who never completed their thesis or someone who completed their thesis and was in full-time employment at the same time. Do such stories mean much at all? We believe that it is of paramount importance that you consider your own strengths and weaknesses and learn from experience of previous written assignments.

Many students believe that their thesis has to prove something extraordinary or that they have to produce a work of art or prove to their supervisor, their family or themselves that they have understood and can do *everything*. However, just as you know more at the end of your studies than you did when you were a freshman, writing your thesis is a learning process, i.e. when it is finished, you will know more than you did when you started. The thesis writing process assumes that you start with broad-based knowledge and that, by the time you submit your thesis, you will have a higher level of academic achievement.

**Don't forget – no-one is perfect.
Getting a qualification is a learning**

There is no doubt that anyone writing a thesis finds it requires concentrated effort. However, this does not mean that it is only an arduous process. It can also be an enriching experience. Like any other assignment, writing a thesis is a

learning process. You learn under way and understand more at the end than you did when you started.

When you are writing your thesis, it is important that you ensure that your work days are structured. You should plan where to work, how long you will work each day and, not least, when you will take time off. This leaflet gives just a few ideas as to how you can achieve this.

At most schools and colleges, students are offered specific help to cope with the thesis writing process. Guidelines are available and you can write your thesis in an individual thesis workspace or join a thesis writing group. All of these initiatives can inspire you to push on or get you back on the right track.

If you still feel that you have reached a dead end or that everything is a mess, you are well-advised to contact the Student Counselling Service. We can help you to structure your thesis work. You can talk to us about personal issues or any other circumstances which could stand in the way of your completing your thesis.

Talk about your difficulties

If, during the thesis writing process, you have drawn to a standstill, it will often help to talk. Many student counselling services offer special help for students who are writing their thesis. You are therefore encouraged to find out what your local student counselling service has to offer.

It may also help to talk to fellow students, friends or family. It's often good for you to explain your thesis to someone who is not well-acquainted with your field of study. When you have been immersed in your field for many years, you tend to take

much of what you know for granted. Talking to a "layman" may help you to become more aware of how much you know and of what you find easy and what difficult to explain to a third party. Talking about how you are coping is one step on the road to recognising the obstacles you face. The more aware you are of the obstacles, the better you are equipped to deal with them.

We know that you may be reluctant to admit that you have reached an impasse or that you find it difficult to cope with your project, even though you have been working on it for some time. It doesn't help at all to close up. On the contrary; clamming up will often make things worse.

And many students feel that they are the only person in the world who faces such problems. You are not alone! A thesis writing group or another forum, in which you can share your thesis writing process with others, can be a big help. The participants in such a group will be at different stages in the process. By sharing your thoughts and experiences, you will recognise the ups and downs and be in a position to help each other and give each other good ideas for moving ahead with the process.

Good advice

- Share how you feel with others
- Find a group of other students who are writing their thesis. Use them as sparring partners!
- Find out what your course offers to students writing their thesis, e.g. are there any thesis writing groups?

Supervisors

You should think carefully about how you use your supervisor. The simple truth is: the clearer you express what help you need, the better position your supervisor will be in to fulfil his or her role. This also applies when you are confused, have reached an impasse or are in doubt about the quality of the work you produce. In such situations, you should ask your supervisor for help to get back on the right track.

In the early stages of a thesis writing process, it may be a good idea to reconcile expectations with your supervisor. For example, you can clarify ambitions, schedules, etc. with a view to working towards the same goals and at an agreed pace. Make sure you know how many hours of guidance you are entitled to and consider how best to exploit them. Think about previous assignments and where your strengths and weaknesses lie. Avail yourself of any opportunities provided at your college or school, e.g. to join a writing group.

We know that having two supervisors on a thesis can sometimes be difficult. This applies, for example, if there is a conflict of interests e.g. between a university supervisor and one employed by a private company. It is therefore decisive that you all meet several times in the initial stages to clarify your expectations and divide the work between the supervisors.

Many students tend to see their supervisor as a censor rather than as a supportive ally. Your supervisors are in fact interested in your product and they are willing to share their knowledge and experience with you. If this process is to be successful, you must allow your supervisor to supervise. If you focus on presenting a faultless, finished product, there won't

be much your supervisor can help you with. If you turn up to meet your supervisor and have questions to ask, you give him or her a chance to contribute constructively to the next stage of the process. If you compare your thesis with a painting, you could say that you start by making studies and rough sketches of the motif you wish to paint. First, you scribble lines and contours. After a long process containing many layers, your final picture appears. If you judge the artist on his early sketches, you will not be able to say anything definite about his or her skills. Of course, the supervisor must assess your material at the end but, if you want help, you have to show him or her your "sketches" first.

Good advice

- Consider your supervisor an ally in the thesis writing process
- Unfinished material is better than nothing because it means that you have kept the ball rolling.
- Ask your supervisor questions
- Come well-prepared to meetings with your supervisor and decide what you want to get out of your meeting.
- Write an agenda.

Structure and frameworks

During the thesis writing period, there will probably be very few scheduled lessons during the week. This means that you are responsible for creating a structure that matches the way you work. It will often be advisable to make a weekly schedule, splitting the days into intervals to match the way you work/study. When you make your schedule, it is important that you take a number of different factors into account. For example:

Where do you work best? At the school or college, at home, in the library, at your parents' home or elsewhere? When do you work best? Before breakfast, before lunch, late evening? For how long can you concentrate? How frequently do you find it good to take a break?

How much progress do you need to make? What do you want to achieve today or by the end of this week? When will you take time off?

Consider the thesis writing process as a job of work. This may make it easier for you to get out of the house and down to work, even on a bad day. Are you aware of negotiating with yourself about your daily workload? Do you have to get up right now? Can you afford a lie-in? Should you start work now or can you wait until later? If you find yourself negotiating, fixed routines, structures and rituals will often be a big help.

Structure is linked to perspective in many ways. Even if you can't establish a fixed schedule from the beginning, it's often advisable to have an idea of what has to happen and when. Try to plan your time using a time-line covering the six-month period you have to write your thesis. You could also use a so-called "mind map" (a drawing of all your ideas with your thesis subject at its centre) to inspire you to pin your topic down and isolate the content of your thesis. Make a monthly view, and then a weekly view and an overall schedule showing when different milestones have to be reached. As you work on your thesis, the structural planning is certain to change, in which case you change your plans on an ongoing basis.

A thesis often tends to seep into every aspect of the student's life. In the end the boundaries between work and time off, between your thesis workplace and home, and even between you and your thesis will be erased.

If you are to work to your best, it is essential that you take breaks. You must not only remember to take short breaks during your working day but you should also take longer breaks, during which you spend your time doing something completely different. It is important that you give your brain a chance to relax and gather new impulses, e.g. you should exercise, engage in creative activity or hang out with friends.

If your home is your workplace, there is a real risk of erasing the boundaries between work and free time. Some students do work best at home while others find they work best away from home. If you often find yourself procrastinating at home (doing the laundry, watching TV or checking Facebook) when you should be working, you would be well-advised to find another place to work. Find a thesis workspace via your school or college, or find yourself an office share where there are other students writing their thesis. Alternatively, if you need to vary where you work on your thesis, you could study at a library or community centre. Many students find it useful to make a sharp distinction between work and play.

Take thesis writing seriously. Turn off the TV, your mobile phone, interrupt your internet connection. Use the media in your breaks or (best) when you have finished work for the day.

If you lose concentration, it may help to have a sheet of paper. List your thoughts and then focus on your thesis again. When you take a break or a day off, you can look at your list and settle anything that is important.

Good advice

- Make weekly plans
- Take breaks and plan time for hobbies, exercise, etc.

- Find out if your school or college has thesis workspaces.
- Use your public or college library.

Writing your thesis

Writing a thesis is a process. You do not know its conclusion in advance. It is a big assignment and you have to produce a great deal of material. It is often a good idea to see the process as an investigation, the answers to which you will get from a series of smaller projects. Most theses are solo projects and working alone presents specific challenges. If you are working on your own, you do not automatically have others to keep tabs on you or agree deadlines with. You depend entirely on yourself and your own self-discipline. There will be many issues to address and students often feel that they are not making headway. In a period where everything seems to have ground to a halt, you may begin to have doubts about yourself. You may begin to wonder if you are intelligent enough, if what you are writing is trivial, or if it makes any sense at all.

In a situation like this, you are advised to talk to others. Find a fellow student or students, who is/are also writing their thesis and who is/are willing to give you feedback. When you talk to others, you will learn that their processes fluctuate too. Others have been in the same position as you and they have successfully moved on.

Perfectionism and insecurity can block the writing process. You may also end up over-exaggerating in an effort to do everything perfectly. Remember that you study in order to learn – not to know everything in advance.

Consider what motivates you to write your thesis and what you expect to gain from it. The clearer you see your purpose, the better you will be able to pitch your work and expectations to both the product and the process.

Good advice

- Write down three good reasons for writing your thesis.
- Remember that writing a thesis is a process – but that it is not a linear process.
- Subdivide your thesis into smaller assignments.
- Find out if you can join a thesis group and get guidance during the process.
- Make use of other students who are writing their thesis.

Personal challenges

The period during which you write your thesis is one in which there will often be time for flights of fantasy. During this period, you may examine the current state of play, both academically and for you personally. You assess how much you have learned on the course and what stage you have reached in life. Issues popping up from an earlier period in the student's life will often disrupt the thesis writing process; something that happened when you were growing up or inappropriate roles and patterns of behaviour which continue to dog relationships and contexts.

Have you given any thought to your approach to creating written material? For example, are you the kind of person who thinks "let's get this over with as soon as possible"? or do you feel that hard work is quite simply a necessity? Or are you the kind of person who submits nothing at all in writing until your

work is perfect in terms of both content and grammar? Your approach may affect the flow of your thesis writing process and influence it in practical and psychological terms.

When you reach the thesis writing stage and thus the end of your studies, many students begin to think about the next life phase. You are on the cusp of a new era and you will see previous choices and priorities in a new light. Doubt and uncertainty may emerge and muddle how you see yourself and the life you lead.

It is often beneficial to allow these feelings to give new impetus rather than to see them as obstacles. For example, if you are aware of your own patterns of behaviour and roles, you can do more of the things that work for you. It's a good idea to talk to close friends about these things as it's often easier to see the situation more clearly from the outside. If you do not feel you have anyone to share such things with, it may be a good idea to seek professional help and advice.

Good advice

- Think about your priorities
- Talk to family and friends about your situation.

Transition from student life to the labour market

The thesis marks the transition from one life phase to the next. Questions, such as: Did I choose the right profession? Can I get work? Have I performed well enough? often crop up towards the end of your studies. You may feel doubt and uncertainty in the face of your new situation. How will you cope with a new job?

During your study period, you will normally have built routines, a social network and a sense of security in the study context. The familiar structure will now be changing and this may make you feel insecure. Many things will change. You will need to reassess your financial situation. How will you make a living? Must you find somewhere else to live? Once you have left the university or college, you may not have the same easy contact with friends from your studies. You will no longer belong to or frequent familiar places. All in all, the framework of your life will change dramatically. Your life will rest on different pillars than before.

You may wonder what you have learned through your studies and whether you know enough to do a job well. Such concerns are typical of the transitional period between student life and working life. Remember: When you have completed a long period of study, you will have learned a lot, even though, in the labour market context, you are still young and inexperienced. What you have to do is discover how you can put what you have learned to practical use. This is yet another learning process!

Thesis contract

When you have found your topic and formulated a more specific thesis statement, you must make a thesis contract, usually for a period of six months. The contract contains a number of formal requirements, including the number of pages, thesis statement and deadline for submission. You, your supervisor and your institute/department must each have a copy of the contract, which substantiates that you are a student writing a thesis in the coming months and that you are therefore in the concluding phase of your course of study.

Some schools or colleges may have different deadlines and special formal requirements for your thesis. It is important that you know what applies to your course of study.

If your thesis is delayed and you find that the deadline stated in your thesis contract is no longer realistic, you can apply for postponement. A delay may be due to sickness, or personal or social circumstances. First and foremost, you should talk to your supervisor so that he/she is acquainted with your situation and together you can draw up an alternative plan. You then send your application for postponement to your college or school. A postponement of three months will often be granted if the delay is well-founded. If you have to adjust your topic and thesis statement, the same procedure is applied, although procedures do vary from one school or college to the next. It is imperative that you reach agreement with your supervisor and that you investigate which specific, formal regulations apply to your particular course of study.

Good advice

- Investigate the thesis regulations and submission deadlines for your particular course of study.
- Contact the Student Counselling Service
- Talk with your GP if you need a medical certificate.

Finances

If your allocation of regular SU (Danish State education grant) ends during the thesis writing process, you can apply for an "SU-Slutlån" (State Educational Grant and Loan Scheme – completion loan). You can receive a completion loan in the last year of your studies. Your school or college is required to confirm that you can complete your studies within 12 months.

To apply for a completion loan, see www.su.dk

You are generally advised to consider your financial situation in the thesis writing period before you start writing your thesis. Will SU be sufficient? Do you need to work part-time? and, if so, how many hours a week do you need?

It is of great help to have your finances well-organised when you are writing your thesis and to have settled financial matters before you start working on your thesis. Once your basic financial situation and framework for writing your thesis are in place, you will be in a better position to write your thesis.

Part-time work may help to structure your daily routines and maintain contact with the labour market. However, work can be a stress factor. It is important that you consider if the job can be combined with writing a thesis. Will you be able to find sufficient time to write and satisfy your boss' expectations with regard to your commitment to and presence at work at the same time?

If you are not entitled to SU or a completion loan, you may have to make a special effort to raise funding. You will need to plan this in advance so that it fits in with the writing of your thesis.

Alternatively, you may be able to take out a bank loan or get a loan from Dansk Studiefond (Danish Study Foundation). www.danskstudiefond.dk

What about your finances after graduation? When you have completed your Masters degree, you are eligible to claim "dagpenge" (unemployment benefit) at graduate rates –

provided that you meet the requirements. Briefly: you must declare that you are available for work, that you are a member of an "A-kasse" (unemployment fund) and you must have registered as a job seeker at a job centre in the municipality in which you are resident. To qualify for graduate rates, you must join an A-kasse and register for work at your local job centre not later than 14 days after finishing your degree course.

If you have been a fully-fledged and active member of an A-kasse for a period of at least one year prior to graduation, you are entitled to unemployment benefit from the first day of unemployment. This means that you avoid the normal one-month quarantine period. Contact your A-kasse for advice on your personal situation.

Learn more about graduate rights and obligations on your A-kasse's website.

Good advice

- Check your SU (Danish State education grant) and your chances of getting a completion loan at www.su.dk
- As the thesis writing process draws to a close, we recommend that you make sure that your job is not too demanding.
- Consider joining an A-kasse (unemployment fund). If you do want to join and qualify for graduate rates of unemployment benefit, you must sign up not later than 14 days after finishing your course of study.

- For further information about unemployment benefits and graduate rates, check out the A-kasse websites.

Use the internet

There are many useful links on the net, which offer help in connection with the thesis writing process. We recommend you spend time finding your way around the offers and guidance available on the internet.

Leaflets and further information

The Student Counselling Service has published a number of leaflets on some of the challenges that student life can present:

Stress

Examinations

Perfectionism

A good study life

Rehabilitation and disability supplement*

Anxiety and panic attacks*

Ten good tips for group work*

Do you keep on putting things off?*

*Only available in electronic format

To order leaflets, please send an e-mail to pjecer@srg.dk

The leaflets can also be downloaded free of charge from www.srg.dk

Read more about the Student Counselling Service at www.srg.dk